

The Source

ADVISORY RADIO NEWSLETTER
Autumn 2003

Let's hear it for Cleveland Metroparks!



In keeping with its mission to enhance people's lives and educate them about the outdoors, earlier this year Cleveland Metroparks launched a series of radio-based audio tours along the band of parks that loops the city. More than 21,000 scenic green acres form this "Emerald Necklace," providing barrier-free opportunities for everyone to commune with nature. See below interesting aspects of their program "Hear here! An Audio Tour of Cleveland Metroparks" - a creative use of radio.

"We were searching for an effective yet affordable way to tell visitors about interesting things to see in the parks - natural and manmade - and to encourage them to tour other sections around the city," explains Cleveland Metroparks Marketing Specialist Brenda Lightner.



Each radio site is near an interesting park feature, *i.e.*, scenic overlook, historic building, restored prairie. By tuning a car radio to 1620 AM, visitors can hear a five-minute, interpretive message about what they are seeing, either the history or natural beauty of each area as well as information on places in the park to explore - hiking trails, snack shops, nearby ice cream stands and nearby natural features such as waterfalls. The scripts were written by park staff and the voiceovers done in a professional recording studio with professional talent. Messages help listeners take full advantage of sites and amenities along the parkway.

Self-led tours allow visitors to move an individual pace. Each stop has a five-minute message that repeats, imparting treasures of the area.

For the project, Cleveland Metroparks wanted a broadcast system that could transmit to cars within 500 feet three-five minute programs. The system had to operate without intervention, be movable from location to location without major effort and have easy-to-change recording capability. It also needed to be weatherproof, since it would be located outdoors, and have a reliable power source and back-up system. The InfoMAX Interpretation Station configuration met all these needs.

Story behind the Story



Brenda Lightner, Cleveland Metroparks spokesperson, led the project.

Chief of Outdoor Education Bob Hinkle, Ph.D., originated the idea for the interpretive program, then Marketing Specialist Brenda Lightner made it happen. She describes behind-the-scenes work this way: "We first held a brainstorming session with staff from Marketing, Outdoor Education and Park Operations. We decided to set up two tours to run throughout the summer and early fall. One historical tour and one natural areas tour. Each tour would have six sites with three on the west side of town and three on the east side. The idea was to pick sites where you could see some of the area from your car as you listened to the radio. Then we hoped most people would get out and further explore the area on foot. We hoped to encourage new visitors to the park. People with families who were maybe busy on weekends, but wanted a somewhat structured activity for older people who could easily drive through the park. We wanted people to be able to participate in the program any day of the week, on their own schedule. Also, we wanted to encourage people to travel from one side of town to the other and see something new."

Challenges and Creative Collaborations

"Deciding what equipment to use and keeping costs in line with a limited budget were the biggest challenges," admits Lightner.

The system is managed by park staff from Marketing and Park Operations. Park Operations staff put together all the equipment purchased from ISS and then modified the solar panels with batteries and timers so that the transmitter would turn on properly each day after the sun came up. Park Operations staff also installed all of the signage.

A Public Report Card, the True Test of Success

Early on in the program, after the first tour had been introduced, Cleveland Metroparks solicited feedback from the public (589 visitors to be exact) to see if they needed to make any adjustments. Most of the comments were positive, according to their research. (Reference: "Historical Audio Tour Evaluation Summary of Results," prepared by Cleveland Metroparks Research & Program Evaluation Manager Brenda K. Lackey, Ph.D., on August 27, 2003.) One thing learned, however, was that there needed to be more signs. So for the second tour, the number was doubled. A research study will also be conducted of the second tour (the natural areas tour) this year. Cleveland Metroparks will compare results of the two studies to see if the public judges the program "improved." On the first report, the satisfaction rating was "good" with an average response of 4.01 on a scale from 1 to 5. "Thus far we see it as a very successful program," Lightner declares.

Success Factors

Much of the self-led tour's success hinges on radio-system reliability and how listeners are made aware of available resources. Cleveland Metroparks made good decisions about how to present the new program:

1. By adding sound to scenery, parks become accessible to families, seniors and people of all ages, including the physically challenged and sight impaired.
2. A comprehensive marketing plan publicizes the program on an on-going basis.
3. Professional voicework in broadcasts enhances the listening experience, even for several minutes at a stretch.
4. The variety and character of the available natural beauty of the parks, along with an interesting human history, makes tours interesting.



Park Operations staff put together all the equipment purchased from ISS, which was later modified so that the solar-operated systems came on at the same time each day.



Signs attract people driving through the parks. Beyond signs, to get the word out, Cleveland Metroparks advertises the program in their monthly newsletter, which goes to 20,000+ people. Another 20,000 copies are made available at facilities, along with a small one-page flyer. Press releases introducing the program went to the media, who picked up the story.

Cleveland Metroparks Suggestions

Lightner advises, "Plan your program in advance as far as picking out the best locations, finding out if you have a power source or need to use solar panels (or are choosing solar to be environmentally friendly), testing out each area by purchasing [or renting] a unit to see if the reception will be good, writing your audio scripts in enough time to check the facts for accuracy, working with a graphic designer to design a logo or identity for the program, and to have fun with the planning like we did. We have three solar sites and three electric powered sites on each tour."

She continues, "ISS gave us good service. Bill [Baker who helped plan the system] was great. He came and spent time with us on-site to get to know our parks and our needs. And he made a second visit to trouble-shoot some difficulties we were having loading our audio onto the systems. This way he was also able to see our system in action first-hand. ISS also spent time talking over product options and helping us meet our budgeting and equipment requirements. We relied on them for their expertise in knowing what types of equipment would work for us."